

D'AULAIRES' BOOK OF
NORSE MYTHS



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D'AULAIRES' BOOK OF
N O R S E
m y T H S

BY INGRID AND EDGAR PARIN D'AUCLAIRE

PREFACE BY MICHAEL CHABON



THE NEW YORK REVIEW CHILDREN'S COLLECTION

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The authors are grateful for the assistance of Odd Nordland, Assistant Professor at the Institute for Nordic Languages and Literature at Oslo University, Oslo, Norway.

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Preface

I was in the third grade when I first read this book, and already suffering the changes, the horns, wings, and tusks that grow on your imagination when you thrive on a steady diet of myths and fairy tales. I had read its predecessor, *d'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths* (1961), and I knew my Old Testament pretty well, from the Creation more or less down to Ruth. There was rape and murder in those other books, revenge, cannibalism, folly, madness, incest, and deceit. And I thought all that was great stuff. (Maybe that says something about me, or about eight-year-old boys generally. I don't really care either way.) Joseph's brothers, enslaving him to some Ishmaelites and then soaking his florid coat in animal blood to horrify their father: great stuff. Orpheus' head, torn off by a raving pack of women, continuing to sing as it floats down the Hebrus River to the sea: that was great stuff, too. Every splendor in those tales had its shadow; every blessing its curse. In those shadows and curses I first encountered the primal darkness of the world, in some of our earliest attempts to explain and understand it.

I was drawn to that darkness. I was repelled by it, too, but as the stories were presented I knew that I was supposed to be only repelled by the darkness and also, somehow, to blame myself for it. Doom and decay, crime and folly, sin and punishment, the imperative to work and sweat and struggle and suffer the Furies, these had entered the world with humankind: we brought them on ourselves. In the Bible it had all started out with a happy couple in the Garden of Eden; in the Greek myths, after a brief eon of divine patricide and child-devouring and a couple of wars in Heaven, there came a long and peaceful Golden Age. In both cases, we were meant to understand, the world had begun with light and been spoiled. Thousands of years of moralizers, preceptors, dramatists, hypocrites, and scolds had been at work on this material, with their dogma, and their hangups, and their refined sense of tragedy. The original darkness was still there in the stories, and it was still very dark indeed. But it had been engineered, like a fetid swamp by the Army Corps, rationalized, bricked up, rechanneled, given a dazzling white coat of cement. It had been turned to the advantage of people trying to make a point to recalcitrant listeners. What remained

was a darkness that, while you recognized it in your own heart, obliged you at the same to recognize its disadvantage, its impoliteness, its unacceptability, its being *wrong*, particularly for eight-year-old boys.

In the world of the Northmen, it was a different story.

As the d'Aulaires told it, in this follow-up volume to their *Book of Greek Myths* (originally titled *Norse Gods and Giants*), there was something in Scandinavian mythology that went beyond the straightforward appeal of violence, monstrosity, feats of arms, sibling rivalry, and ripping yarns. Here the darkness was not solely the fault of humans, the inevitable product of their unfitness, their inherent inferiority to a God or gods who—quite cruelly, under the circumstances—had created them.

The world of Norse gods and men and giants, which the d'Aulaires depicted, in a stunning series of lithographs, with such loving and whimsical and brutal delicacy, begins in darkness, and ends in darkness, and is veined like a fire with darkness that forks and branches. It is a world conjured *against* darkness, in its lee, so to speak; around a fire, in a camp at the edges of a continent-sized forest, under a sky black with snow clouds, with nothing to the north but nothingness and flickering ice. It assumes darkness, and its only conclusion is darkness (apart from a transparently tacked-on post-Christian postlude). Those veins of calamity and violence and ruin that structure it, like the forking of a fire or of the plot of a story, serve to make more vivid the magical glint of goodness that light and color represent. (Everything that is beautiful, in the Norse world, is something that glints: sparks from ringing hammers, stars, gold and gems, the Aurora borealis, tooled swords and helmets and armbands, fire, a woman's hair, wine and mead in a golden cup.) Here the gods themselves are no better or worse, in the moral sense, than humans. They have the glint of courage, of truthfulness, loyalty, wit, and in them maybe it shines a little brighter, as their darkness throws deeper shadows. The morality encoded in these stories is a fundamental one of hospitality and revenge, gift-giving and life-taking, oaths sworn, dooms pronounced, cruel and unforgettable pranks. Moreover (and to my eight-year-old imagination this more than anything endeared them to me) the Norse gods are *mortal*. Sure, you probably knew that already, but think about it again for a minute or two. *Mortal gods*. Gods whose flaws of character—pride, unfaithfulness, cruelty, deception, seduction—while no worse than those of Jehovah or the Olympians, will one day, *and they know this*, prove their undoing.

Great stuff. Start anywhere; start with Odin. First he murders the gigantic, hideous monster who whelped his father, and slaughters him to make the universe. Then he plucks out his own right eyeball and trades it to an ice giant for a sip—a sip!—of water from the well of secret knowledge. Next he hangs himself, from a tree, for nine days and nine nights, and in a trance of divine asphyxia devises the runes. Then he opens a vein in his arm and lets his blood commingle with that of the worst (and most appealing) creature who ever lived, thus setting in motion the chain of events that will lead to the extinction of himself, everyone he loves, and all the nine worlds (beautifully mapped on the book's endpapers) that he himself once shaped from the skull, lungs, heart, bones, teeth, and blood of his grandfather.

The d'Aulaires capture all of this, reporting it in a straightforward, fustian-free, magical-realist prose that never stops to shake its head or gape at marvels and freaks and disasters, making them seem somehow all the stranger, and more believable. Their spectacular and quirky illustrations (a pair of adjectives appropriate to few illustrators that I can think of offhand) never found a more appropriate subject than the Norse world, with its odd blend of gorgeousness and violence, its wild prodigies and grim humor. What makes the book such a powerful feat of visual storytelling is the way in which the prose and the pictures (reflecting, perhaps, the marriage and lifelong partnership of the authors) complement each other, advance each other's agenda. Almost every page that is not taken up by a giant bursting lithograph of stars and monsters is *ornamented*, with a smaller drawing, or with one of the curious, cryptic, twisted little margin-men, those human curlicues of fire, that so disquieted me as a kid and continue, to this day, to freak out and delight my own kids. Through this intricate gallery of marvels and filigree the text walks with calm assurance, gazing calmly into every abyss, letting the art do the work of bedazzlement while seeing to it that the remarkable facts—the powers and shortcomings of Mjolnir the mighty hammer, the strange parentage of Sleipnir, Odin's eight-legged steed—are laid bare. This simultaneous effect of wonderment and acceptance, this doubled strength, allows the d'Aulaires to balance their recreation of the Norse world exactly on its point of greatest intensity: the figure of Loki.

Ally and enemy, genius and failure; delightful and despicable, ridiculous and deadly, beautiful and hideous, hilarious and bitter, clever and foolish, Loki is the God of Nothing in Particular yet unmistakably of the ambiguous World Itself. It was in reading this book that I first felt the power

of that ambiguity. Loki never turned up among the lists of Great Literary Heroes (or Villains) of Childhood, and yet he was my favorite character in the book that was for many years my favorite, a book whose subtitle might have been *How Loki Ruined the World and Made It Worth Talking About*. Loki was the god of my own mind as a child, with its competing impulses of vandalism and vision, of imagining things and smashing them. And as he cooked up schemes and foiled them, fathered monsters and stymied them, helped forestall the end of things and hastened it, he was god of the endlessly complicating nature of plot, of storytelling itself.

I grew up in a time of mortal gods who knew, like Odin, that the world of marvels they had created was on the verge, through their own faithlessness and might, of Ragnarokk, a time when the best impulses of men and the worst were laid bare in Mississippi and Vietnam, when the suburban Midgard where I grew up was threatened—or so we were told—by frost-giants and fire-giants sworn to destroy it. And I guess I saw all of that reflected in this book. But if those parallels were there, then so was Loki, and not merely in his treachery and his urge to scheme and spoil. Loki was funny—he made the other gods laugh. In his fickleness and his fertile imagination he even brought pleasure to Odin, who with all his well-sipping and auto-asphyxiation knew too much ever to be otherwise amused. This was, in fact, the reason why Odin had taken the great, foredoomed step of making Loki his blood brother—for the pleasure, pure and simple, of his company. Loki was the god of the irresistible gag, the gratuitous punchline, the improvised, half-baked solution—the God of the Eight-Year-Old Boy—and like all great jokers and improvisers, as often the butt and the perpetrator of his greatest stunts.

In the end, it was not the familiar darkness of the universe and of my human heart that bound me forever to this book and the nine worlds it contained. It was the bright thread of silliness, of mockery and self-mockery, of gods forced (repeatedly) to dress as women, and submit to the amorous attentions of stallions, and wrestle old ladies. The d'Aulaires' heterogeneous drawings catch hold precisely of that thread: they are neo-Raphaelite friezes as cartooned by *Popeye's* Elsie Segar, at once grandiose and goofy, in a way that reflects both the Norse universe—which begins, after all, with a cow, a great world-sized heifer, patiently, obsessively licking at a salty patch in the primal stew—and my own.

We all grew up—all of us, from the beginning—in a time of violence and invention, absurdity and Armageddon, prey and witness to the worst and the best in humanity, in a world ruined and made interesting by Loki. I took comfort, as a kid, in knowing that things had always been as awful and as wonderful as they were now, that the world was always on the edge of total destruction, even if, in Maryland in 1969, as today, it seemed a little more true than usual.

MICHAEL CHABON

D'AULAIRES' BOOK OF
NORSE MYTHS

INGRI MORTENSON and EDGAR PARIN D'AULAIRE met at art school in Munich in 1921. Edgar's father was a noted Italian portrait painter, his mother a Parisian. Ingri, the youngest of five children, traced her lineage back to the Viking kings.

The couple married in Norway, then moved to Paris. As Bohemian artists, they often talked about emigrating to America. "The enormous continent with all its possibilities and grandeur caught our imagination," Edgar later recalled.

A small payment from a bus accident provided the means. Edgar sailed alone to New York where he earned enough by illustrating books to buy passage for his wife. Once there, Ingri painted portraits and hosted modest dinner parties. The head librarian of the New York Public Library's juvenile department attended one of those. Why, she asked, didn't they create picture books for children?

The d'Aulaires published their first children's book in 1931. Next came three books steeped in the Scandinavian folklore of Ingri's childhood. Then the couple turned their talents to the history of their new country. The result was a series of beautifully illustrated books about American heroes, one of which, *Abraham Lincoln*, won the d'Aulaires the American Library Association's Caldecott Medal. Finally they turned to the realm of myths.

The d'Aulaires worked as a team on both art and text throughout their joint career. Originally, they used stone lithography for their illustrations. A single four-color illustration required four slabs of Bavarian limestone that weighed up to two hundred pounds apiece. The technique gave their illustrations an uncanny hand-drawn vibrancy. When, in the early 1960s, this process became too expensive, the d'Aulaires switched to acetate sheets which closely approximated the texture of lithographic stone.

In their nearly five-decade career, the d'Aulaires received high critical acclaim for their distinguished contributions to children's literature. They were working on a new book when Ingri died in 1980 at the age of seventy-five. Edgar continued working until he died in 1985 at the age of eighty-six.

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